
T H O U G H T S

ON THE

S L A V E R Y

OF THE

N E G R O E S.



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THOUGHTS

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THOUGHTS
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THE humanity of the present age has established a great variety of institutions for the relief of the numerous misfortunes incident to our infirm nature. The sick, the lame, the blind, the insane; those whom disease or accident, united with poverty, have rendered helpless, become the objects of compassion and assistance to their more fortunate neighbours. But, as it is an

observable characteristic of the human mind, to be more affected by objects which are near, than by those which are remote, their vicinity is an important circumstance in the excitement and the application of this benevolence. The relation of distant calamities, however terrible, of famines, of pestilence, of earthquakes, of countries desolated by war, produces indeed a temporary sympathy, but it is soon dispersed by cares or pleasures, which press for more immediate attention. Evils of such magnitude, it is true, are beyond the reach of our partial succour, and we may be excused from the romantic attempt of relieving every distress, in every quarter of the globe; but there is one flagrant instance, in which every Briton is interested, in which multitudes of our unhappy and unoffending fellow-creatures are exposed to sufferings that humanity shudders at, and in which relief is withheld, though within our power, because
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the scene of oppression is distant, and the hearts of those who are immediately engaged in it, are hardened by the powerful influence of avarice and habit, and because these very sufferings are the source of public revenue and private wealth. The subject alluded to, is the system adopted for employing the negroes in the West-Indian Islands, and that ignominious traffic, called the Slave Trade.

The institutions of law in those islands are calculated to depress this unhappy class of mankind below the rank of manhood, and have accordingly established a very great disproportion between their offences and their punishments. If a negro, from whatever provocation, kills a white man, he is burnt alive. If a white man kills a negro of his own, under whatever circumstances of cruelty and injustice, his punishment is commuted for a small fine, which yet is sel-

dom exacted. An assault, amongst the negroes, is construed into rebellion, and rebellion is punished with tortures and death. For offences of a fainter complexion, for inattention, or negligence, the master, according to Sir Hans Sloane,* is satisfied with dismemberment, or severe flagellations, with pepper and salt scattered on the wounds, for the purpose of increasing the pain. These poor people are indeed considered as much the property of the owner, as his horse or his dog, but they are not so much the objects of his humane attention. There is no controul in the laws to prevent his treating them in whatever manner he thinks fit, except indeed the fine above-mentioned. Nor in a country injured to scenes of oppression can much reliance be had on its manners and principles, perhaps a surer safeguard, when preserved pure, to the morals of a people, than the strictest regulations of law. The only resource which remains to defend

defend the life of the negro, is the consideration that it is involved in the interest of his employer; the force of which may indeed protect his wretched existence till sickness or age render him incapable of labour, but allows none of those comforts which alleviate the miseries of life. His sufferings receive no mitigation from the humble hope that his manumission, though distant, may at length arrive; but day after day presents the same dreary rotation of unrewarded toil, miserable food, and severe whippings, inflicted often for trifling, and sometimes for imaginary offences. When this situation is compared with the liberty, the ease, and the independence which the Africans enjoy in their own country, where, according to the relations of travellers,* there seems to be a sort of exemption from the general doom

* See Adanson's Voyage to Senegal, and the Modern Universal History.

of man to perpetual labour, and nature produces the fruits of the earth almost spontaneously, who but must condemn the rough hand of power which forces them, or the arts of treachery which entice them, to leave it!

A system of law favourable to the protection, the instruction, and even the manumission, of the negroes has been adopted in some of the foreign islands, particularly the French, where the negroes are allowed for religious instruction and rest from labour, not only the first day of the week, but every festival usually observed by the Romish church. In others, encouragements are held out to industry by allotting to the slave one day in the week, besides Sunday, for his own use, and by that means furnishing him with an opportunity of gradually purchasing his freedom by voluntary labour. It is no wonder the poor wretches should be tempted to escape, though

though at the hazard of severe punishment, to those places where there is a certainty of milder treatment, and some possibility of recovering their liberty. Attempts to instruct the British slaves, or to mitigate their sufferings, have, on the contrary, generally been discouraged by the narrow prejudices of the planters, or by the illiberal policy of the governing powers. The improvements of reason, and the instructions of religion, are, indeed not without some propriety, discountenanced, as obnoxious to that jealousy and pride of power which always accompany the distinction between master and slave.

It has however been said, in favour of the slave trade, that the negroes are of a race inferior in talents and docility to the white nations, and that the stubbornness and indolence of their temper can only be wrought upon by the most rigorous treatment, of which they
have

have no right to complain, since, being captives of war, their slavery is the condition of their existence, and the only change they experience is that of masters: that it is impossible to cultivate sugar, rice, and other commodities, without such assistance, and that the superior number of negroes, in the places where they are kept, to the white inhabitants, renders the most rigid subjection necessary, as is evident from the frequency of insurrections: lastly, slavery has always been practised, it is said, amongst the most liberal and enlightened nations, the Greeks, the Romans, and even the Jews under the theocracy; a circumstance which proves the state of slavery to be not inconsistent with the dispensations and appointments of Providence.

That there is, in every nation, a very considerable disparity between man and man, in the degree, and the exertion, of the intellectual faculties, cannot be denied.

denied. But the inferiority which is attributed to the whole race of negroes probably arises from that depression of mind which accompanies a state of slavery, and from the discouragement thrown in the way of every liberal inquiry, rather than from any original, intellectual defect. The definition of slavery, according to Cicero, is the obedience of a broken and abject spirit, possessing no will of its own.* And Montesquieu,† thus delineates more particularly its baleful effects on the human mind; “ It is not good in itself. It is
 “ neither useful to the master, nor to the
 “ slave. Not to the slave, because he
 “ can do nothing from virtuous motives. Not to the master, because he
 “ contracts among his slaves all sorts of
 “ bad habits, and accustoms himself to
 “ the neglect of all the moral virtues.
 “ He becomes haughty, passionate, ob-

* Par. 5. 1. † De l'Esprit des Loix. l. xv. c. 1.

“ durate,

" durate, vindictive, voluptuous, and
 " cruel." And, with respect to this
 particular species of slavery, he proceeds
 to say, " It is impossible to allow that
 " the negroes are men, because if we
 " allow them to be men, it will begin
 " to be believed, that we ourselves are
 " not Christians." It cannot be ex-
 pected that, in their low state of civi-
 lization, the Africans can have arrived
 at any great attainment in the arts;
 but the letters of Ignatius Sancho, and
 the Poems of Phillis Wheatly, suffici-
 ently prove that they are neither defici-
 ent in the feelings of humanity, nor the
 powers of the understanding. Adanson,
 in his Voyage to Senegal, relates that
 the negroes are well acquainted with
 most of the planets, and that with pro-
 per instruments they might become good
 astronomers.* And Bosman, Brue, Bar-
 bot, and Holben, who had all been re-

* P. 254.

fidents in the country, bear ample testimony to the ingenuity of these unhappy people in the mechanical arts, and to their capacity for the administration of civil government.*

Even granting the inferiority contended for, they cannot be denied to be *men*, and the inhumanity of treating them worse than brutes, can derive no justification from thence. The probable means of removing their ignorance one would naturally suppose to be patient and gentle instruction, administered gradually as their unenlightened minds are capable of receiving it. But the violence with which they are separated from their native country, and the rigid discipline of the whip, must *as naturally* tend to create an aversion to the doctrines of those who adopt such modes of com-

* Mod. Univ. Hist. B. xvii. Ch. 7.—Benezet on the Slave Trade.

municating

municating them. If they are sullen and intractable to labour, it would not be amiss if the master was seriously to consider from what principle he claims a title to compel them. Purchase transfers no title but that which the seller possessed, namely *power*. If indeed *power* always implies *right*, the Europeans may, with a safe conscience, oppress and destroy the negroes at pleasure. Tyranny and cruelty have, in all times, sought to palliate their conduct by recriminatory charges of obstinacy, conspiracies, and rebellion. There is no proof that the negroes would not be equally tractable with the whites, under a mild and generous treatment. Indolence and stubbornness are the natural consequence of hopeless poverty and ill usage.

That the produce of the West-Indian Islands cannot be attained, like that of other countries, by the efforts of voluntary

luntary servitude, it will be difficult to prove. Other countries are situated in the same climates, but the same degree of domestic tyranny exists no where, except in America, in some parts of which steps are now taking towards the abolition of it. The degree of heat which makes labour irksome, frequently lessens the necessity of it by a luxurious vegetation, and the hope of reward is a stronger incentive to industry, than the dread of punishment. The working of mines was formerly thought to be fit employment only for slaves or criminals, yet, with proper encouragement, most of them, at least in Europe, are now chearfully and advantageously wrought by hired labourers. "There is no labour," says an author before cited, "so painful, that it cannot be proportioned to the strength of the workman, provided that reason, not avarice, be the rule. The application of mechanical inventions may, in

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" many

“ many instances, supply the place of
 “ servile labour. There is not perhaps
 “ a climate on the earth, where free-
 “ men may not be engaged to work.
 “ Because laws were bad, men were
 “ found to be idle; because they are
 “ idle, they are put in a state of sla-
 “ very.”* The expence of cultivation
 might possibly be somewhat increased
 by procuring free labourers instead of
 slaves, though even that is doubtful;
 but what is the price, or indeed the
 existence, of the articles cultivated by
 slaves, in comparison with the misery
 and oppression by which they are pro-
 duced? The objection, from motives of
 commercial policy, amounts to this, that
 the claims of religion and morality ought
 to be subservient to those of avarice and
 luxury, and that it is better thousands of
 poor unoffending people should be de-
 graded and destroyed in the most abject

* Montesquieu de l'Esprit des Loix, l. xv. ch. 8.

slavery,

slavery, than that the inhabitants of Europe should pay a higher price for their rum, rice, and sugar.

Slavery, amongst the ancients, may be traced to three original sources.

First, Debtors who sold themselves to their creditors: the injustice of which need not be expatiated upon; for as the slave is allowed to possess no property, it is plain he can receive no equivalent for the surrender of his life and his liberty, both which are held to be in the master's disposal.

Secondly, Captives taken in war: the iniquity of which is equally evident, when it is considered, that the right over a vanquished enemy extends only to restraining him from committing future injuries, and not to any kind of punishment.

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Thirdly,

Thirdly, Birth: which depending on one of the other sources, can claim no principle of justification but what they possess, nor even so much, as the innocent children can neither be considered as debtors nor enemies.

The history of the Africans presents us with an additional source, a disgraceful commerce, in which the slaves are bought at a public mart, stowed together as the common cargo of the vessel, without regard to decency, cleanliness, or health, and cast over-board in case of short allowance or danger, without reluctance or pity. For the support of this commerce recourse is frequently had to violence, or fraud, and it is an indisputable fact, that, besides the temptation which a constant market for slaves holds out to the avarice, or the intemperance of the natives, arts have frequently been practised to foment wars among them. We find no instance among

among the ancient Heathens, of such a traffic with their captives, nor of that systematic oppression with which the negroes are treated at this day by professed Christians. Slavery amongst the Greeks and Romans was frequently mitigated to servitude; and amongst the Jews, a people to whom, for the hardness of their hearts, we are told, "Statutes were given, which were not good,"* it was either limited in duration, or consented to by the parties themselves; except with respect to the Heathens around them,† whom they were commissioned, by an express command which no other nation can assume as a precedent, not only to enslave, but in many instances utterly to extirpate and destroy. Yet to do justly, and to love mercy, are precepts delivered under the Jewish dispensation; and, in the immediate administration of the theocracy,

* Ezek. xx. 25

† Lev. xxv. 44

we find no subject more fruitful of complaint and chastisement, than the oppression of the poor and the slaves. Amongst the Romans, the slaves were indulged with some property of their own, the reward of their industry and good behaviour, which was distinguished by the name of *peculium*; a laudable practice, which the French also have imitated in their own islands, as has been mentioned. In the English islands, the laws, so far from allowing them a *peculium*, afford them no protection from the most atrocious injuries. That death to which as captives of war they might, however unjustly, be doomed, is surely ill exchanged for a life of such degradation and pain. At all events, if the principles and progress of slavery be founded in injustice, no sanction of antiquity can warrant its continuance.

However incumbent it be on the individuals concerned in this species of property to satisfy the demands of reason

son and conscience by relinquishing it, experience has taught, that it is too deeply entangled with motives of interest and habits of power to be voluntarily abandoned, at least in any general line. The sense of what is right, too frequently requires the salutary assistance of law to overcome the temptation to persevere in what is known to be wrong. The alteration and gradual subversion of this system, can only be hoped for from the interposition of the British legislature, which would, in this instance, be granted with peculiar propriety, because the revenue of the government, the profits of the merchants, and the luxury of the people, have involved the whole nation as *participes criminis*: and the burthen of restoring to the Africans their alienated rights should not press too partially on the planters, who adopted, not introduced, this iniquitous traffick, and have pursued it under the patronage of Britain, but should be

borne by all who share in its advantages. The first measure which presents itself to the wish of humanity, seems to be the absolute prohibition of all importations of slaves into any part of the British dominions. The emancipation of those already in slavery, and the means of procuring supplies of freemen, will claim, no doubt, the maturest deliberation of wise and experienced men. Perhaps it may not be impracticable to hire the negroes fairly in their own country, embark them with their own consent, and allow them to return, in a limited time, if they chose it: perhaps, by encouragement of population, to which slavery has always proved an invincible obstacle,* a succession of the present race

* “ The remains that are found of slavery in the
 “ American colonies, and among some European na-
 “ tions, would never surely create a desire of rendering
 “ it more universal. The little humanity commonly
 “ observed in persons, accustomed from their infancy to
 “ exercise

race in the islands might be continued as free servants: or perhaps a supply of voluntary labourers may be procured from other nations.

“ exercise so great an authority over their fellow-
 “ creatures, and to trample upon human nature, were
 “ sufficient alone to disgust us with that authority.
 “ Nor can a more probable reason be given for the se-
 “ vere, I might say, barbarous manners of ancient
 “ times, than the practice of domestick slavery; by
 “ which every man of rank was rendered a petty ty-
 “ rant, and educated amidst the flattery, submission,
 “ and low debasement of his slaves.”——“ If London
 “ at present, without increasing, needs a yearly recruit
 “ from the country of five thousand people, as is com-
 “ monly computed, what must it require if the greatest
 “ part of the tradesmen and common people were
 “ slaves, and were hindered from breeding by their
 “ avaricious masters?”——“ All I pretend to infer from
 “ these reasonings is, that slavery is in general disad-
 “ vantageous, both to the happiness and populousness
 “ of mankind; and that its place is much better sup-
 “ plied by the practice of hired servants.” HUME,
 Ess. on the Pop. of Anc. Nat.

The same author cites Xenophon, Demosthenes, and Plautus, in proof that the Athenians treatment of their slaves was extremely gentle and indulgent.

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There may be some well-disposed minds who think that if the slaves were better treated, and properly instructed in the Christian religion, their condition might give them an opportunity, not afforded in their own country, of learning the truths of the gospel, of quitting the idolatry of their ancestors, and of making their temporal toil conduce to their eternal happiness. Thus Louis XIII. who established this worst species of tyranny in the French colonies, after a conflict between his humanity and his superstition, issued at length the fatal edict, because he was told it was the surest way of converting the Africans.* It must be confessed, to the disgrace of the English nation and the Protestant profession, that religious instruction has been more attended to in the Popish colonies than in the English, where, indeed, attempts of that kind have not merely been neglected, but

* Labat, as cited by Montesquieu, *De l'Esp. des Loix*, l. xv. c. 4.

have

have been obstructed. It cannot, however, be admitted that even such a plan, conducted with zeal and liberality, though laudable in itself, would reconcile the negro-trade with the principles of humanity. The end cannot justify the means. It never was intended that the gospel of peace should be propagated by the violation of every tender connection, by compulsion, and by fraud.

Another plea for the regulation, rather than the abolition, of the slave-trade, will probably be adduced from the desire of preserving an extensive commerce, and from the relation of certain travellers and missionaries, who represent the fecundity of the women, and the defect of natural affection amongst the Africans to be such, that a father will frequently exchange a son or a daughter for a cow, a piece of cloth, or even a bottle of wine or brandy; and that their quarrels amongst themselves

themselves are frequent, and carried on with the greatest animosity; the prisoners on both sides being branded as slaves, and sold, if not to Europeans, to other nations of the African race; from which it is inferred, that if protection, instruction, and moderate usage were afforded them, if all stratagems to inveigle were strictly prohibited, if the commerce were restrained to those only who are previously, and *de facto*, slaves, and if a limitation were made of the number to be carried in one ship, no injury would be done them, the West Indian commerce would be preserved, and the exchange might be mutually beneficial to the planters and the slaves.

The insuperable objection to this plea, without excepting against the authenticity of these accounts, is, that it is taking advantage of another's wrong. If slaves are unjustly reduced to that condition by the contingencies of war,

or

or the unnatural caprice of a parent, (which, if it exists, is probably owing to the polygamy and promiscuous concubinage of the negroes) no subsequent purchase can convert the wrong into right; as the receiver of stolen goods, knowing them to be so, is equally culpable with the thief. No right exists, as has been shewn, to alienate from another his liberty, so as to sell him for a slave, and therefore every purchase of a slave is in contradiction to the original inherent rights of mankind. Besides the injustice of the principle, which must be retained under every modification of it, the impracticability of such restrictions is obvious. No impartial jurisdiction resides, or can reside, in the country, to discriminate those who are already slaves according to the custom of the country, from those who are not so, or from others, who are led into captivity for the purpose of supplying the European markets; and every one knows that

that when interest and power are combined against the mere consciousness of right, the former generally prevail.

I omit the consideration of criminals who have forfeited their lives or liberties. The posterity of such, not incurring the guilt of their parents, cannot justly be subjected to the same punishment; and, of themselves, their number must be too few to answer the purpose of the trader or the planter.

If it be asked, why a system, which has been established and encouraged for near a century, should *now* be attacked; or why *this*, of the many oppressions under which human nature groans, should be singled out for complaint; the answer may be given in the words of the Preacher, "*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.*" The time of the oldest, and the abilities of the wisest men, are too little to remedy
all

all the defects of political government, or to repel the incursions of vice, in the various shapes it may assume ; but, to relieve the miserable, and to do good to all men, are plain and practical precepts of humanity, which fall within the line of every man's duty, whenever an opportunity offers of fulfilling them. And it must entirely obviate this objection to remark, that if antiquity of system could justify error and oppression ; or if it were an established principle, that *no* evils were to be remedied, because *all* could not, the reformed religion would not now subsist, nor would the inquisitions have been abolished.

A candid inquiry into this subject must surely terminate in a call upon those who are invested with the power of redress, for the gradual indeed, but total abolition of slavery, in every part of the British dominions ; and, till that be accomplished, for some authoritative act,

act, to render the present situation of the slaves more tolerable, to allow them some profit from the sweat of their brow, to provide some mode of instructing them in useful truths, and rigidly to prohibit the importation of more.



F I N I S.

